

It Ain't Easy being Wheezy!

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How is a Marathon runner different from a sedentary person of his age? A marathon runner can manage to run 42 km successfully, while a sedentary person may find difficulty in walking even a kilometer. How can one explain such great difference in performance? Higher performance can be easily achieved by proper body conditioning by regular practice. Would it possible to achieve same in patients with crippling lung problems such as Asthma? Pulmonary rehabilitation makes it possible! Yes, it's possible to achieve. A 27-year old Asthmatic patient Ankit, came to me saying 'I want to go trekking in monsoon as I used to earlier, My Asthma isn't allowing me to', and after 3 months of Pulmonary Rehabilitation Hola I see his updates of Rajmachi and Ulhas valley treks!!

Pulmonary Rehabilitation (PR) is "Best Supportive Care" which doesn't cure your Asthma but makes you feel better and more confident and in control of your problem.

Why has Pulmonary Rehab been largely unheard of so far among people with lung diseases like Asthma?

Sadly, many Doctors themselves are unaware about the effectiveness of PR and even if they refer, the patients aren't ready to break the myth, of conserving oxygen by not exercising and fear of triggering symptoms. Social embarrassment and overprotection by relatives are different stories altogether. Few PR setups and travel issues add up to the dismay further.

We are trying to cope up by conducting Awareness programs, Respiratory updates, Workshops not only for Doctors and Physiotherapists but also Patients.

Do Indian institutes offer specialized training in the discipline?

Yes, most of the Medical colleges offer a two to three-year Post-graduation course of 'Masters in Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Physiotherapy' after completing basic Physiotherapy course of four and half years, where they are trained for Pulmonary as well as Cardiac Rehabilitation.

How can Pulmonary Rehab help asthma patients? Can all asthma patients' benefit, or will it be counter-productive in some cases?

I hear often, 'When I have Asthmatic episode I feel like a Fish with no water!' PR is about helping you manage your Asthma better. Your age and the severity of your condition will not stop you from taking part in PR, or from seeing an improvement.

PR will:

- Help you to feel less breathless doing day-to-day activities, such as walking upstairs, bathing and dressing. You would feel less tired too
- Help to improve your muscle strength, so you can use the oxygen you breathe more efficiently
- Improve your general fitness and help you to cope better with feeling out of breath
- Help you to feel stronger and fitter, and able to do more
- Reduce dependency on Medicines, Inhalers and Oxygen therapy
- Reduce the exacerbation rates and hospitalizations.

Please bear in mind, your lung function may or may not change, depending on the severity of asthma so you might not see a difference when you take the 'blowing test'. But there would be significant improvement in your Quality of life. PR can help you get back as close as possible to your life prior to the onset of lung problem. In addition to education, supervision, tips and advice, you would experience a sense of community which is equally as important.

How many PR sessions are required to manage Asthma? Can anyone also undertake a few sessions to improve their lung capacity and fight off chances of developing asthma and other lung conditions due to rising pollution levels?

For asthmatics and other lung conditions

Usually a period of 3 months is evident for effectiveness of the program (most patients start feeling improvement in just a month). Since our body works on the principle of 'Use it or lose it' a lifelong Home maintenance program is recommended for all.

For prevention of lung conditions caused by air pollution

The deadly power of air pollution is no new finding. According to WHO (World Health Organization), by 2040 Asia will account for almost 90 percent of the rise in premature deaths attributable to air pollution. One can definitely prevent and fight off the chances of developing lung conditions by few sessions of PR, which would include designing a healthy lifestyle, enhancing immunity and modifying environment for an individual. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't take care of air pollution.

When do doctors prescribe Pulmonary Rehab for their asthma patients?

Due to lack of awareness, Patients join PR at much later stage when the severity is impairing daily activities. I would suggest once optimal medical therapy medical is done, 'The sooner, the better' to start PR.

The Asthma guideline draws attention to at least discuss incorporation of exercise activities, healthy lifestyle, self-management and if required then provide precautions to prevent exercise induced asthma for all Asthma patients.

What other ailments is it recommended for? Also, at present, what health condition is it most prescribed more?

Significant effectiveness of PR is seen in

- Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis,
- Other Interstitial Lung Diseases,
- COPD,
- Pulmonary Hypertension,
- Bronchiectasis,
- Cystic Fibrosis,
- Post TB Fibrosis,
- Sleep Apnea,
- Lung cancer,
- Obesity related lung problem,
- Preparation for or recovery from Thoracic Surgery (e.g. Lung Resection, Lung Volume Reduction Surgery, Lung Transplantation).

Basically, any patient with Lung problem who is breathless and/or experiences restriction in activities despite optimal medical management.

Pulmonary Rehabilitation is a cornerstone of management and most commonly prescribed therapy for Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis/ Interstitial Lung Diseases and COPD.

Of course, what does pulmonary rehab entail? Is it simply a good mix of what yoga and perhaps a guided gym routine offers?

A PR program is combination of Assessment, Exercises and Education. Thus, it would incorporate Yoga and routine Gym, but has its difference essence.

A PR course will always start with an assessment of your health and abilities. The health care professionals will ask questions to understand,

- What you can and cannot do
- How activity affects you
- How do you feel and are coping with your condition?

During your course, you will be taught how to exercise safely and effectively and manage breathlessness and feelings of anxiety or panic. This will be carefully designed according to your needs, so that it provides just the right level of activity for you.

There would be discussions where following information about living with a lung condition would be shared:

- Why exercise is so important for people with lung conditions
- Breathing techniques to use when recovering your breath or airway clearance techniques
- How to manage stress
- Healthy eating
- Recognizing and managing trigger factors
- How to use your inhalers and other medicines
- What to do when you are unwell
- How to conserve energy, simplify and modify activities
- Oxygen therapy
- Traveling with lung problem
- Coping with sex life

With the alarming rise in air pollution and lung conditions, it's time to take earliest action and 'Live a Quality life through Pulmonary Rehabilitation!'

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